

## **Oral Testimony of Frank Strickland**

CJS Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing

April 1, 2004

Chairman Wolf, Ranking Member Serrano, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Legal Services Corporation Board of Directors, I appreciate the chance to be with you today and update you on LSC's ongoing efforts to provide effective civil legal assistance to eligible low-income clients with legitimate civil legal needs.

I would like to acknowledge a milestone and a recent retirement at LSC. This year, the Legal Services Corporation is celebrating 30 years of providing access to the civil justice system in America. In 1974, President Nixon signed the LSC Act into law with bipartisan support from Congress. Three decades later, we continue to enjoy the support of the White House and members of both political parties, and for that, we at LSC are extremely grateful.

Congressman John Erlenborn helped establish LSC and then worked to keep it on solid footing. John, of course, served with distinction as a Republican member of the House of Representatives for 20 years. He served as one of the floor managers of the LSC Act of 1974 and marshaled support for its passage. He went on to serve two terms on the LSC Board, and became LSC's President in 1999. John took a well-deserved retirement at the end of 2003. I thought it

appropriate today to acknowledge Congressman Erlenborn for service to LSC spanning more than three decades. He sends his greetings to Members of this subcommittee.

We on the Board are fortunate to have found a successor to John who is uniquely qualified to lead this Corporation forward. Helaine Barnett is a leader of unmatched experience, integrity, and vision who has dedicated her entire professional life to equal justice. Her work as a legal services provider, in fact, predates LSC's own existence. Helaine spent three decades as a manager of the civil division of the country's largest legal services organization, located in New York City. And she has held innumerable leadership roles in the legal community at the national, state, and local levels. The Board is proud to have found Helaine to guide LSC. She understands the challenges of providing services to clients at the ground level. And she has an abiding respect for Congress' role in setting LSC policy and is fully committed to the Board's bipartisan approach.

That approach begins with strictly enforcing the rules. The Board and LSC senior management continue to treat our compliance and enforcement duties with the utmost seriousness. Our Office of Compliance and Enforcement closely monitors each LSC grantee to discern potential problems and help implement corrective action plans where problems are found. Working with LSC's Inspector

General and independent public accountants that audit every grantee annually, we have in place a system for internal oversight that allows us serve as a responsible steward of federal funds. LSC will not hesitate to sanction programs that violate the 1996 congressional restrictions, or any other applicable laws or LSC regulations.

For FY05, LSC seeks a modest four percent increase in our appropriation to \$352.4 million. We at LSC understand these are difficult economic times in America, and we appreciate the repeated actions taken by this subcommittee to ensure that LSC maintains at least level funding. Our request for an FY05 increase in basic field grants comes as the 2000 Census reports that LSC's eligible client population now exceeds 43 million – a record-high.

Since this is my first appearance before this subcommittee, I want to say a few words about my background. I have been in practice in Atlanta for 38 years. One of the highlights of my career has been my work with legal services. During my term as president of the Atlanta Bar Association in 1985, we sponsored a program to provide legal representation for Cubans who were being detained by the INS in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary after arriving on our shores in the Freedom Flotilla at President Carter's invitation. We had help from the Atlanta Legal Aid Society. Here was another group without access to our justice system. Approximately

400 lawyers volunteered to represent more than 800 Cuban detainees in administrative parole proceedings before INS hearing officers. I will never forget the experience of meeting with my Cuban clients at the federal prison with a translator. Not only were these individuals beyond access to our justice system, they were in a foreign country where they didn't speak the language or understand the issues confronting them. This experience had a profound effect on me.

I subsequently served on the boards of directors of both LSC grantees in Georgia for a total of 11 years. When LSC's budget was reduced by \$122 million in 1996, I saw how our local legal services leaders streamlined their programs to focus on critical cases that demanded their attention. A decade later, LSC has strategically chosen to fund only those grantees with a similar commitment to basic services. We feel this emphasis is the overriding reason why the Bush Administration has placed its faith in LSC. It's also the reason, to my mind, why Members of this subcommittee ought to feel more confident now than at any time in LSC's 30-year history that any prospective funding increase will go to help only those individuals who truly need and deserve our assistance.

I know Members of the Subcommittee have some specific questions for Helaine and me about various issues, so I would like to conclude my remarks now and thank the committee for this opportunity.